




**UNIVERSITI PUTRA MALAYSIA**


**FROM SUBSISTENCE TO SIMPLE COMMODITY PRODUCTION:  
ECONOMIC RELATIONS IN TWO SEMAI SETTLEMENTS**

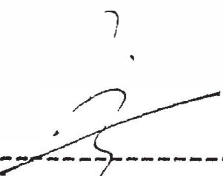
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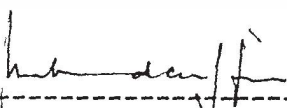
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FROM SUBSISTENCE TO SIMPLE COMMODITY PRODUCTION:  
ECONOMIC RELATIONS IN TWO SEMAI SETTLEMENTS

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A thesis submitted in partial fulfilment of the  
requirements for the degree of Master of Science in the  
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FROM SUBSISTENCE TO SIMPLE COMMODITY PRODUCTION:  
ECONOMIC RELATIONS IN TWO SEMAI SETTLEMENTS

by

Colin G. Nicholas

November 1985

Supervisor : Dr. Mohd Ariff Hussein  
Faculty : Resource economics and Agribusiness

This study documents and analyzes the changes occurring in the Semai settlements of Kampung Kuala Tual and Kampung Sungei Buntu since the early 1950s. In particular, the focus is on the transformation of their economies from one which was subsistence-oriented to another which was dominated by production for exchange.

Information and data pertaining to the change in the form of Semai production -- gathered by the participant-observation method -- are analyzed within a theoretical framework which emphasizes the struggle for the effective control of their production.



The contention is that the changes in Semai production were primarily effected by two parties: the state, on the one hand and merchant capital on the other, who were interested in the Semai for their own respective needs. More specifically, the state was preoccupied with the preservation of national security while merchant capital was interested in the gains which could be made from unequal exchange. In order to realize their objectives, both parties sought to establish and reinforce the necessary conditions for the introduction of commodity relations -- a prelude to their effective regulation and re-organization of Semai production along the lines of simple commodity production.

For the Semai, this resulted in a gradual erosion of the humanizing features of their natural economy, including that of a loss of their autonomy. Much of their investible surplus were also appropriated through the operation of the 'simple reproduction squeeze'. This resulted in the Semai being reduced to a position of dependency and relative impoverishment.

In its conclusion, the thesis calls for a radical re-conceptualization of the development paradigm; one in which minority groups such as the Semai would be given their right to self-determination and which would allow the rightful development of their full potential.



Abstrak tesis yang dikemukakan kepada Senat  
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FROM SUBSISTENCE TO SIMPLE COMMODITY PRODUCTION:  
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oleh

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November 1985

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Kajian ini mendokumentasikan dan menganalisis perubahan-perubahan yang telah berlaku di dua perkampungan Semai -- iaitu, Kampung Kuala Tual dan Kampung Sungei Buntu -- sejak awal 1950an. Fokus, terutamanya, adalah pada perubahan sistem ekonomi mereka daripada suatu sistem di mana pengeluaran bercorak 'subsistence-oriented' kepada sistem di mana pengeluaran untuk pertukaran, ataupun 'production for exchange' diutamakan.

Maklumat dan data tentang perubahan dalam sistem pengeluaran Semai dikumpulkan dengan menggunakan kaedah 'participation-observation'. Rangka teori yang digunakan

menitikberatkan faktor persaingan antara beberapa pihak untuk mengawal pengeluaran Semai.

Cadangan di sini adalah bahawa perubahan-perubahan yang berlaku dalam sistem pengeluaran Semai terutamanya diakibatkan oleh dua pihak: pihak kerajaan ('the state') dan pihak kapitalis dagangan ('merchant capital'). Kedua-dua pihak ini berminat terhadap golongan Semai untuk membela kepentingan mereka diri sendiri. Khususnya, pihak kerajaan asyik menjaga keselamatan negara. Pihak kapitalis dagangan pula berminat untuk mendapatkan keuntungan daripada pertukaran (dengan golongan Semai) yang tidak seimbang itu. Untuk mencapai matlamat masing-masing, kedua-dua pihak itu berusaha supaya membentuk dan memperkukuhkan suatu keadaan yang sesuai untuk mengujudkan perhubungan barangan ataupun 'commodity relations' dalam masyarakat Semai. Langkah ini merupakan langkah pertama dalam proses pengawalan dan organisasi semula sistem pengeluaran Semai mengikut corak pengeluaran barangan utama ('simple commodity production').

Kesannya, ciri-ciri kemanusiaan dalam sistem ekonomi semulajadi ('natural economy') Semai terkikis, termasuknya kehilangan otonomi. Lebihan ('surplus') mereka yang boleh dilabur itu pun telah diambil oleh pihak lain melalui proses 'simple reproduction squeeze'. Akhirnya, posisi golongan

Semai telah pun meruntuh. Mereka jatuh ke lembah pergantungan dan kepaparan.

Sebagai kesimpulan, tesis ini menyeru supaya paradigma pembangunan dicipta semula secara radikal. Golongan minoriti seperti golongan Semai harus diberi balik hak asasi mereka untuk menentukan masa hadapan diri sendiri dan digalakkan supaya membela potensi mereka dengan seluas-luasnya.

## GLOSSARY OF SEMAI TERMS

batin	- headman of a village/settlement
bawur	- fishing with hook and line
bicaraq	- village court-in-council
chin-haq	- belief that all non-Semai always out to do harm to the Semai
dah-git	- felling of large trees for new swiddens
darq	- spear spring trap
ee choq	- fishing by spearing
ee cuci	- post-firing cleaning of the swiddens
ee den	- threshing
ee gerrm	- winnowing (vertically)
ee rorb	- fishing with bare hands
ee seh	- husking
ee seloit	- winnowing (sideways)
ee sukat	- measuring of padi (quantity)
embong	- rattan back-basket
gerrnsang	- night long 'sings'
gob	- Malay
gu	- population in a particular river basin, under a common batin
guniq	- spirit-familiar
halaq	- shaman
hee-ling	- frying (to dry damp padi)
hii	- kinsmen, fellow villagers (we,us)

hoin	- behavioural concept concerning the satisfying of wants and needs
kedeq	- spring-trap for tree-dwelling rodents
ker-kohl	- clearing of undergrowth of new swiddens
ketua baq	- head of a swidden group
kit keiq	- harvesting
mai	- outsiders, non-Semai (they)
maq	- food taboo
meriang	- large bamboo weir for trapping fish
nenggirik	- customary land (usually representing a particular river basin)
nggern-haq	- system of (food) sharing
nyoq	- weeding
pehunan	- food taboo
roke ee baq	- sowing of padi seeds
ruai baq	- padi spirit
selai	- swidden / dry padi field
selai chagol	- small swidden / garden
ser	- fishing with bamboo cage traps
tort	- burning / firing
tuai	- rice-knive (for harvesting)
tugal	- dibble-stick
tugal eek	- dibbling, making holes for the deposit of padi seeds
yuit	- machete

## CHAPTER 1

### INTRODUCTION

#### THE PROBLEM IN HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE

The indigenous peoples of Peninsular Malaysia belong to at least nineteen distinct tribal groups and although they are usually categorized for administrative purposes as "Negrito", "Senoi" and "Proto-Malays", each tribal group is unique in that it has a language and a mode of living quite different from the other. Numbering 63,648 in 1983 (see Table 1), the Orang Asli<sup>1</sup>, as they are now collectively referred to, are among the most economically backward and politically isolated peoples in the country (Government of Malaysia 1984:81).

---

<sup>1</sup> The term "Orang Asli", which is Malay for "original people", officially came into use in 1966. Prior to this, derogatory terms such as "savages", "sakai" (meaning slave) and "orang liar" (wild man) were used in general conversation as well as in the literature. Even the word "aborigine" was later abandoned as it was thought to be discriminatory. Significantly, it was the communist insurgents who were the first to use the word "asal" (which has the same Arabic root word as "Asli") to refer to the Orang Asli, as in their "Asal Groups" which were established to win the Orang Asli over to their side.

TABLE 1  
POPULATION DISTRIBUTION OF THE ORANG ASLI  
IN PENINSULAR MALAYSIA (1983)

=====				
1.	Negrito			
	1.1	Kintaq	103	
	1.2	Kensiu	101	
	1.3	Jahai	882	
	1.4	Mendriq	144	
	1.5	Bateq	785	
	1.6	Lanoh	224	2,239
2.	Senoi			
	2.1	Semai	18,327	
	2.2	Temiar	12,712	
	2.3	Che Wong	203	
	2.4	Jah Hut	2,442	
	2.5	Semoq Beri	1,785	
	2.6	Mah Meri	1,355	36,824
3.	Proto-Malay			
	3.1	Temuan	9,312	
	3.2	Semelai	2,923	
	3.3	Jakun/Temoq	9,853	
	3.4	Orang Kanaq	34	
	3.5	Orang Seletar	541	
	3.6	Orang Kuala	1,922	24,585
			<hr/>	
			Total	63,648
=====				

Source: Jimin (1983:3-4,16)

Prior to the arrival of the later Malaysians, however, the Orang Asli were living an autonomous lifestyle based on subsistence production. In any case, they did not, at any time, live in complete isolation as there are documented accounts of varying levels of inter-tribal and tribal-alien contacts. For example, Noone (1954) found evidence of trade in blowpipes and blowpipe- bamboo among certain tribes in the states of Kedah, Perak, Kelantan and Pahang where the Department of Aborigines was in constant contact. Evidence has also been provided by Dunn (1975:109) to show that the Orang Asli have played a significant role in the Malay Peninsula's economic history as collectors and primary traders as far back as the 5th century A.D. Also, Walker (1983:460-1), citing an early 19th century report, writes of Negritos providing forest products as tribute to the Malay chiefs of the river basins they resided in.

There seemed, therefore, to be a certain amount of interaction between the Orang Asli and the other ethnic groups, particularly the Malays who resided along the jungle fringes. Jungle products such as rattan, resin and bamboo were exchanged for bush-knives, cooking pots, salt and cloth which were highly valued by the Orang Asli. Some of the initial contacts, however, were unfortunately characterized by cruelty and mutual hostility as when the Orang Asli, particularly the young children, were sought after and brought into slavery. A considerable trade in slaves soon



developed -- and even continued into the present century -- despite the official abolition of all forms of slavery in 1884 (Skeat and Blagden 1906,I:533; Jones 1968:289-90; Carey 1976b:52-3; Sullivan 1982:68). As bartering was the major mode of exchange during this period, the role played by capital (particularly merchant capital) was nevertheless insignificant.

Since the late 1940's, however, the Orang Asli have been subjected to new forces which not only threatened their traditional mode of living but which also plunged them into an era of rapid social change, over which they had virtually no control. The Emergency during 1948-60, and in particular the resettlement policy of the colonial government, was one such factor which was to radically transform the social and economic fabric of the Orang Asli. In particular, the Brigg's Plan, which involved relocating much of the rural population into "new villages", successfully prevented the insurgents from getting material help from their sympathisers there. Consequently, they were forced to operate from areas in deep jungle, where they sought the help of the Orang Asli. In an attempt to prevent the Orang Asli from giving food and information to the communist insurgents, the colonial authorities uprooted whole villages and moved the inhabitants to hastily-prepared resettlement camps. Carey (1976a:306-7) described this act as one which "showed both lack of imagination and great stupidity". In